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Viṣṇu's Mohinī Incarnation

An Iconographical and Sexological Study

by RAJU KALIDOS

Avatāra is a descent or down-coming of God ⁽¹⁾ as a human being or animal with a view to protect the world from demons and evil-mongers ⁽²⁾. Viṣṇu, the Hindu God of Protection, is said to have descended to the earth through his major *avatāras* ⁽³⁾, which are ten in number ⁽⁴⁾. There are also partial incarnations of Viṣṇu, known as *aṁśāvatāra* ⁽⁵⁾. The medieval Tamil lexicon, *Piṅgalam*, describes Mohinī as one among the *mūvaintavatāram* 'fifteen incarnations' of Viṣṇu ⁽⁶⁾. This indicates that, apart from the ten major ones there are a number of minor *avatāras* connected with Viṣṇu. Mohinī is one among the minor *avatāras*. Viṣṇu is said to have taken the form of Mohinī on three important occasion: (1) to distribute the *amṛta* 'ambrosia' among the demons and gods when the Ocean of Milk was churned, (2) the visit to the Dārūka forest along with Bhikṣāṭana as the latter's spouse and (3) the destruction of Bhaṣmāsura.

⁽¹⁾ According to J. Gonda the *avatāra* is only an appearance (*Erscheinung*). Ebegg calls it an embodiment (*Verkörperung*) (Parrinder 1970: 19, fn. 20). In ordinary parlance it is rendered into incarnation which we follow in the present paper.

⁽²⁾ *Bhagavatgītā*, chap. IV, v. 8.

Paritrāṇāya sadhūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām

Dharme samsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge.

'To protect the peace-makers, to destroy the evil-mongers, / And to establish righteousness, [I will be] born aeon after aeon'.

⁽³⁾ The major incarnations are called *daśāvatāra* 'ten incarnations'. They are *Matsya* 'Fish', *Kūrma* 'Tortoise', *Varāha* 'Boar', *Nṛsimha* 'Man-Lion', *Vāmana* 'Dwarf', *Trivikrama*, *Paraśurāma*, *Śrī Rāma*, *Balarāma* or *Buddha*, *Kṛṣṇa* and *Kalki* (Basham 1971: 304-49).

⁽⁴⁾ According to the *Śrī Mahādēvī Bhāgavatam* the incarnations of Viṣṇu are twenty-six in all. In addition to the *daśāvatāra* noted above, the longer list includes *Sanaka*, *Sananda*, *Sanātana*, *Sanatkumāra*, *Nārada*, *Nara Nārāyaṇas*, *Kapila*, *Dattātreya*, *Yajña*, *Rṣabha*, *Pṛthu*, *Mohinī*, *Garuḍa*, *Dhanvantari*, and *Vyāsa*.

⁽⁵⁾ *Aṁśāvatāra* is only a partial manifestation or incarnation of an *aṁśa* 'particle' of Viṣṇu (Zimmer 1951: 390). *Śrī Mahādēvī Bhāgavatam* gives a lengthy list of such partial incarnations (Mani 1975: 33).

⁽⁶⁾ It (*Piṅgalam*, 2: 140) omits *Pṛthu* and *Garuḍa* but includes *Ayakkirīvaṇ* (*Hayagrīva* in Sanskrit) and *Bauddha* (*Buddha*).

The aim of the present paper is to trace the mythological background of Viṣṇu's Mohinī *avatāras* and the iconography of Mohinī as gleaned from *Śilpa-śāstras* and *Purāṇas* and the application of Mohinī iconography in art. The paper consists of four parts, of which the first three are devoted to the theoretical aspects of the above mentioned Mohinī incarnation, which constitutes an entity in itself and dealing with literary and art forms. The fourth part is a separate entity dealing with an analytical interpretation of the Mohinī theme in the wake of certain sociological-sexological beliefs of the Hindus. It purports to prove that the Hindu society was not so hygienic as suggested by scholars like A.L. Basham (1971: 173) who concluded that aberrative sexual practices such as homosexuality were not popular among the Hindus. The present paper attempts to disprove the thesis of A.L. Basham in the light of the Mohinī theme in literature and art.

1. Mohinī Legends

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇam*, also known as *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, relates the story of the origin and activities of Mohinī. Once upon a time the *devas* 'gods' and *asuras* 'demons' who were like rats and cats in enmity entered into an alliance to churn the Tiruppārkkāḍal 'Ocean of Milk' with a view to obtaining the *amṛta*, which was supposed to make the consumer immortal, and share it among themselves. They used the mountain, Mantharā, as the churnstick and the snake, Vāsuki, as the churning rope. Viṣṇu himself in his form as *Kūrma* served as the pivot upon which the Mantharā rested. While the churning was in progress a deadly venom called *hālabāla* or *kālakūṭa* was emitted by Vāsuki. The demons and gods, dreading the ferocity of the venom invoked the aid of Śaṅkara 'Śiva', the God of Destruction in the Hindu Trinity, who gulped it down and saved the victims from destruction. When *kṣīrābhimanthanam* 'Churning the Ocean of Milk' was over, Dhanvantari emerged from the Ocean with the *amṛtaghaṭa* 'pot of ambrosia' in his hands. Immediately the deceitful demons, wilfully disregarding the contract, snatched the pot and ran away. The helpless gods did not know what to do and implored Viṣṇu to come to their rescue. Viṣṇu who decided to give tit for tat, assumed the form of a beautiful damsel, Mohinī, to deceive the demons by evoking their lustful feelings and to recover the *amṛta*. She proceeded to the spot where the demons were quarreling over how to share the *amṛta* among themselves. As expected, the demons lost their senses, enticed by the beauty of Mohinī. Hoping to win her favour, they entrusted the *amṛtaghaṭa* to her with a request to share it out. Mohinī agreed to do the job on condition that the nectar should also be distributed to the gods since they were eligible for a share and that the demons should not question whatever she might do by way of distribution. The demons, steeped in libidinous speculations to win the

hand of Mohinī, approved the conditions. By her sweet words, gestures and smile she beguiled the demons, and distributed the *amṛta* only among the gods. Thus the demons were deprived of their legitimate share of the *amṛta* because of their greediness. Then Viṣṇu disclosed his original form to the demons. All the gods applauded Viṣṇu for his sagacious and timely help. To praise Viṣṇu, Śiva went to the former's abode, Vaikuṇṭha, followed by his attendants. In eulogising terms, he requested Viṣṇu to show the Mohinī form once again so that he and his attendants could have the privilege of witnessing that glorious sight. To fulfill the wishes of Śiva, Viṣṇu once again appeared as Mohinī. The vision was so enchanting and enrapturing that Śiva lost himself in sexual urge and followed Mohinī to a secluded place forgetting all about his attendants and family. The impulse of infatuation forced Śiva to ejaculate semen profusely. All the surface on earth where Śiva's semen was deposited became mines of silver and gold. Then Śiva realised his folly and recovered completely from the spell of libido. Viṣṇu applauded him as the best among the gods who was able to withstand even the lure of Mohinī (*Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, chaps. 7-9).

The *Skanda Purāṇam* avers that Śiva not only lost himself in the beauty of Mohinī but also had sexual intercourse with her as a result of which a son by the name Hariharaputra (⁽⁷⁾) was born (⁽⁸⁾). The *Kāñchi Purāṇam* (*Mācāttaṇṇali Pataḷam*, vv. 23-24) of Śivañānasvāmigaḷ, a Tamil work of the 18th century A.D., attests the same information. The *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇam* (4th-6th centuries A.D.) also has an interpolated episode relating to the birth of Sāsta through Mohinī (Arunachalam 1977: 33-34). A traditional view prevalent among orthodox scholars regarding the nature of Sāsta's birth is that the latter was born in the *kai* 'hand' of Mohinī since she received Śiva's semen in her hands. So it is said that one born in *kai* was called Kaiyaṇṇaṇ (Oppert 1972: 509). It is because of this illegal birth Sāsta came to be known as Marachaṇ 'the illegal Lord' in the Nāñjināḍu (Southern Travancore) region in Tamilnadu (Arunachalam 1977: 35-37).

Mohinī on another occasion is said to have paid a visit to the Dārūka forest along with Śiva. Dārūka was the abode of *ṛṣis* 'sages' who by immaculate and strenuous penance had acquired great spiritual and occult powers. They were very proud of their powers and were under the intoxicating impression that even gods like Śiva and Viṣṇu were no match for their prowess. To teach them a lesson, Viṣṇu as Mohinī and Śiva as Bhikṣāṭana went to Dārūka. Their lustre and youth-

(⁽⁷⁾) Hari stands for Viṣṇu and Hara for Śiva. *Putra* implies son. Hariharaputra was known variously as Sāsta, Ārya Sāsta, Dharma Sāsta, Aiyappaṇ, Aiyaṇār and so on.

(⁽⁸⁾) The *Kanda Purāṇam* (I, 2: 32) of Kacciyappa Śivāchārya, an adaptation of the Sanskrit original, the *Skanda Purāṇam* (7th-9th centuries A.D.), is assigned to various dates ranging from the 12th to the 17th centuries A.D. The most widely accepted date is the 14th century A.D.

fulness captivated all the *ṛṣis* and their *patnīs* 'wives' who followed Mohinī and Bhikṣāṭana respectively, steeped in lecherous thoughts. All of a sudden they realised that they were being deceived by the young couple and cursed them. They also waged a cunning war with Bhikṣāṭana but were ultimately defeated and humbled.

Mohinī is also connected with the destruction of a powerful demon called Bhasmāsura 'dust demon' ⁽⁹⁾. The latter was an invincible creature who by virtue of a boon from Śiva had the power to reduce one to ashes by placing his hands on the victim's head. When the boon was granted by Śiva, the demon wanted to test the efficacy of the boon by placing his hand on the head of Śiva himself. Chased by the demon, Śiva ran hither and thither and prayed to Viṣṇu to come to his aid. Viṣṇu appeared in the guise of Mohinī to distract the attention of the demon. On seeing Mohinī, the demon forgot all about Śiva and started wooing her. Mohinī cajoled him saying that she liked the demon very much and was prepared to fulfill his wishes, provided he came to her after a cleansing bath with his head smeared with oil. Accordingly the demon put oil on his head. Instantly he himself was turned to ashes (Oppert 1972: 508). According to another version of the myth, the demon went on imitating the various kinds of dance recitals enacted by Mohinī. At the climax of the recital, she placed both of her hands on her own head, which the demon imitated unfalteringly and was consumed by flames. In some Tamil ballads, it is said that Śiva fell in love with Mohinī only after this incident. When Śiva ejaculated semen at the climax of sexual passion, Mohinī caught the seeds in her hands. Sāsta was born in the hands of Mohinī (Arunachalam 1977: 33-34).

2. Iconography of Mohinī

Iconographically Mohinī is a simple theme. She is neither multi-armed nor multi-faced. Her images are thus not complex. She has no special symbols. Her hands are usually two in number and she holds a vase of nectar in one of them. Mohinī is a beautiful woman glowing with youthful lust. She wears colourful garments and is decked with ornaments (Gupte 1972: 35, 71).

The *Śilpaśāstras* do not treat Mohinī as an independent form. As a spouse she is associated with either Kaṅkālamūrti ⁽¹⁰⁾ or Bhikṣāṭana. She is expected to

⁽⁹⁾ It is said that there is no reference to Bhasmāsura in the *Purāṇas*. According to *Sivalilāmṛta*, a Marathi work, he was born out of the *bhasma* 'dust' on the body of Śiva (Mani 1975: 122).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Śiva as Bhikṣāṭana went to Vaikuṇṭha, Viṣṇu's abode, begging arms. Viṣvaksena, the gatekeeper, denied him entry. In a fit of anger Śiva kicked off the head of Viṣvaksena with his *triśūla* 'trident'. Due to *brahmahatti* 'sin of killing a Brahmana' the body of Viṣvaksena stuck to the trident. In this form Śiva is called Kaṅkālamūrti.

stand on the right side of Kaṅkālamūrti with a pot of food. She wears transparent garments, exhibiting her genitals (*Silparatna*, chap. 22, vv. 123-26). While dealing with the iconography of Bhikṣāṭana, the *Silpaśāstras* just state that all the attributes of Kaṅkālamūrti are applicable also to Bhikṣāṭana (*Silparatna*, chap. 22, v. 142). So Mohinī as described in connection with Kaṅkālamūrti is expected to be present also in the company of Bhikṣāṭana. Some of the *Silpaśāstras* just state that Kaṅkālamūrti is surrounded by women (*Sarasvatīyacitrakarmasāstra*, chap. 24, vv. 21-22). The women are supposed to be *ṛṣipatnīs* (*Agastyasakalā-dhikāra*, chap. 13, vv. 360-2).

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇam* writing about Mohinī as present in the company of demons states that she is a very beautiful young woman, noted for bodily lustre and youthful age. She has eyes resembling the petals of lotus. She is endowed with extraordinarily beautiful eyes and thighs which resemble the trunks of elephants. She is thin waisted. Her breasts are like water jugs. She wears a beautiful saree and anklets (*Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, VIII, chap. 7, vv. 1-2, 3, 6, 17). Mohinī in association with Śiva is described as a damsel playing with a ball. She wears a shining and slippery saree which is fastened with a belt. She has broad, captivating and ruthless eyes. Her breasts are tossing with animation. When Śiva underwent the high tide of his lusty emotions, Mohinī's garments blew away and she stood stark naked (*Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, VIII, chap. 12, vv. 18-20, 23).

Regarding the association of Mohinī with the Churning of Tiruppārkkāḍal or Bhaṣmāsura the *Silpaśāstras* have nothing to say.

3. Mohinī and Related Themes in Art

Churning Tiruppārkkāḍal and Mohinī are popularly represented in Indian and Eastern art ⁽¹¹⁾. Mohinī appears in connection with the following themes in art: (1) seduction of *ṛṣis*, (2) Mohinī in the company of Śiva as holding the lat-

⁽¹¹⁾ In the present paper Mohinī and related themes are treated with special reference to the wood carvings of Tamilnadu. The choice of wood carvings to illustrate the present theme is arbitrary since the author's area of specialisation happens to be the wood carvings of Tamilnadu. The choice is justifiable under the pretext that the wood carving of Tamilnadu is a hitherto unexplored area for survey and study. Some fifty specimens relating to the various aspects of the Mohinī myth have been traced from the various parts of Tamilnadu, mainly from the wooden *rathas* or *tērs* 'temple cars' which constitute the bulk of wooden monuments. The details pertaining to the whereabouts and location of these specimens are presented in the annex to the present paper. Whenever a reference to a particular specimen occurs in the text of the paper, the specimen numbers given for the specimens alone are given within brackets.

ter's genitals, (3) Śiva and Viṣṇu (Mohinī) swinging a cradle, (4) Mohinī in the company of Kaṅkālamūrti and (5) Mohinī with Bhaṣmāsura. All these indicate that in art forms all the three episodes (*supra*) connecting Mohinī and Śiva are popular. The absence of some of these forms in the *śilpa* texts for codification of iconic rules tends to suggest that a myth takes its manifestation first in Pūrāṇic literature, then in art portrayals and then in *Śilpaśāstras*. In the present case the theme under consideration has not undergone the third stage.

Churning the Ocean of Milk

It is a bold and heroic theme. Things such as a big mountain, a big snake, gigantic demons and so on are involved in the presentation of this theme. A colossal monument in harmony with the spirit of the theme comes from Angkor Thom (Kampuchea) where the whirling of Mantharā using a huge snake, Vāsuki, is presented with the gods and demons gripping the serpent in their hands ⁽¹²⁾ (Sivaramamurti 1970: pls. 3-4). In Tamilnadu the theme is mostly depicted in the *gopuras* 'temple gateways' which provide the spacious venue necessary for the depiction of this gigantic theme. One example of this is found in the Eastern *gopura* of the Sthāṇumalaya Perumāḷ Temple at Suchindram (Kanyākumari District). In the wooden temple cars also the theme is fairly well represented. Eleven specimens (Nos. 1 to 11) are presented in the miniature carvings in the temple cars. In most of them the *devas* and *asuras* are found holding the tail portion and head portion of Vāsuki, respectively (figs. 1-2). Vāsuki has the shape of a huge rope, encircling the Mantharā. In one (No. 2) Vāsuki is five-hooded, Mantharā is in the shape of a double-edged cone. In some specimens (Nos. 8 & 11) the hill resembles a Liṅga ⁽¹³⁾ at whose base lays the *kūrma*. The Liṅga resting on the circular *kūrma* is highly suggestive because in iconic representation the *āvaḍai* is usually circular in shape. The present illustration seems to suggest the female and male ethos of Viṣṇu and Śiva, respectively. Very rarely Viṣṇu himself appears as the mountain (fig. 2). It could have been an innovation of the ingenious and repulsive Vaiṣṇava artist who wanted to present Viṣṇu himself as the Male Principle. In this connection it may be noted that most of the Mohinī and related themes are traceable from Śiva temples (79.3%, 42/53) and their aim is to exalt the place of Śiva before Viṣṇu. The demons in most of the illustrations appear as virile, sturdy creatures. Some of them are in therian-

⁽¹²⁾ A similar monument comes from Angkor Vat (Kampuchea) which is a miniature panel by comparison (Lee n.d.: 239, fig. 304). Both the monuments under consideration belong to the early medieval period.

⁽¹³⁾ Liṅga 'phallus' is the object of adoration in Śiva temples. It represents the male genital organ which in iconic presentation rests on a circular pedestal called *āvaḍai* 'vagina'. Their merger is a typical symbolism of sexual union (Sen 1972: 35).

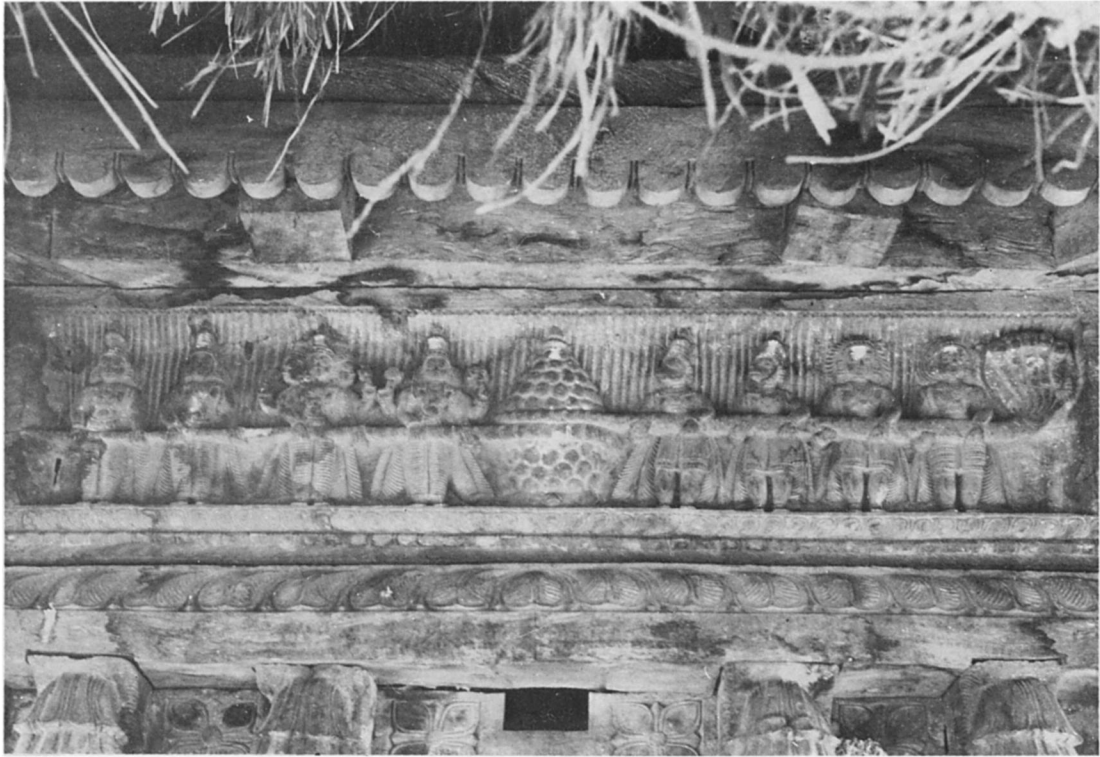


Fig. 1 - Churning the Ocean of Milk, Gaṅgādiśvara Temple Car, Chinna Salem.

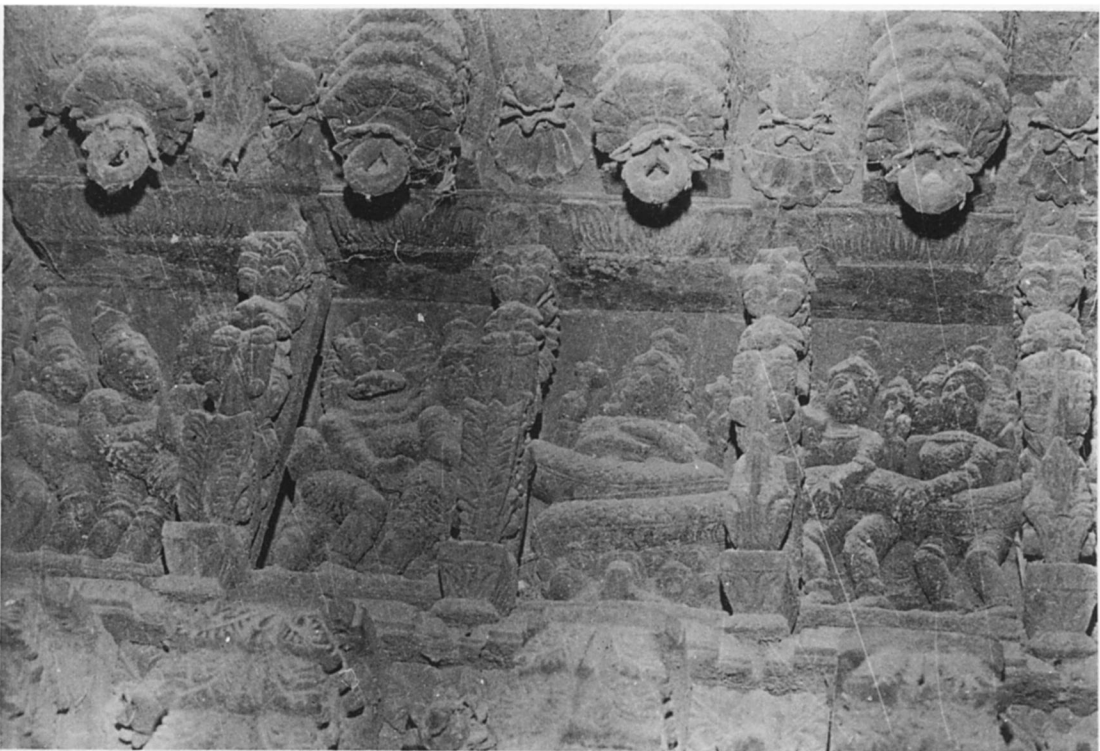


Fig. 2 - Churning the Ocean of Milk, Tirukkāmeśvara Temple, Gaṇapati Car, Villiyānūr.

thropic form with a lion or horse head and human body. The gods appear benign and effeminate. Among the gods, Brahmā, the Hindu God of Creation, and Viṣṇu are found in some specimens. Viṣṇu is four-armed (No. 2) and bears the *śaṅkha* 'conch' and *cakra* 'disc' in his rear hands while the two front hands are holding Vāsuki. Brahmā is also four-armed (Nos. 2 & 11) and bears the *ka-maṇḍalū* 'water jug' and *akṣamālā* 'rosary' in his back hands while the front hands are in the same pose as Viṣṇu.

In a unique specimen (No. 8) Nīlakaṇṭha⁽¹⁴⁾, Pārvatī and Ālālasundara⁽¹⁵⁾ are found to be present in the *amṛtamanthana* 'churning for ambrosia' panel whose presence is not traceable in the same theme elsewhere. In it Śiva is seated in *sukhāsana*. He is four-armed. But three hands alone are visible, one being hidden by the standing figure of Pārvatī. Śiva's back left hand bears the *mrga* 'antelope'. The front left hand is in *varada mudrā*. The front right hand is receiving the poison, which ascends like a stream from below the motif depicting *amṛtamanthana* (fig. 3). Pārvatī stands to his right⁽¹⁶⁾, leaning towards Śiva and holding his neck tightly with both her hands. Ālālasundara stands to the left of Śiva with hands folded in *añjali hasta* as a mark of respect⁽¹⁷⁾. All the three are wearing *karaṇḍa makutas*. The expression on the face of Śiva suggests that he is tasting something bitter. This is in agreement with the version of the *Śrī-tatvanidhi* (Pt. I 3: 61), the *Śilpāśāstra*, which observes that the face of Śiva should be like that of a mad elephant consuming poison.

Mohinī and Śiva

Six specimens in the temple cars (Nos. 12 to 17) depict the intercourse of Mohinī with Śiva. In one (No. 12) Mohinī stands gracefully with her left leg

⁽¹⁴⁾ Nīlakaṇṭha 'the blue throated one' is so called since the venom emitted by Vāsuki was swallowed by him terrifying his consort, Pārvatī, who hastened to hold his neck tightly, preventing the poison from descending and having its effects. Due to the evil effects of the poison, remaining in the neck itself, the throat became blue in colour and hence the appellation. He is also called Viṣāpaharaṇamūrti 'he who seized the poison to drink it' and Viṣāharamūrti 'one who removed or grasped the poison' (*Śrī-tatvanidhi*, Pt. I, 3: 61). He is also known as Śrīkaṇṭha 'the she-throated' and Viṣakaṇṭha 'the poison-throated'.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Ālālasundara was a page attending on Śiva. It was he who collected the poison when discharged by Vāsuki and handed it over to his master and is thus called Ālālasundara. *Ālabālam* is a Tamilised form of *bālabāla*. Ālālasundara appears very rarely in iconographical specimens.

⁽¹⁶⁾ According to the *Kāraṇāgama* she should stand to the left of Śiva (Sastri 1916: 140).

⁽¹⁷⁾ He seems to be four-armed since a hand is found projecting upwards from behind the front left hand (fig. 3). If so, it cannot be an attendant since attendants and better halves in the company of their lords usually have two hands only. If the figure in question is a four-armed one, it may represent Viṣṇu because the object held in the back left hand appears to be *śaṅkha*. He is perhaps present here to witness the feat performed by Śiva.

placed firmly on the ground while the right leg is slightly lifted in *kuñcita* attitude and thrown across the standing leg. She holds (fig. 4A) a bunch of flowers (?) in her hands. The infatuated Śiva stands in front of her ⁽¹⁸⁾. In the adjoining panel (fig. 4B), both Śiva and Mohinī are found manipulating each other's sexual organs. Both of them are fully under the spell of libido. Śiva is four handed. He bears the *mṛga* and *ṭaṅka* 'chisel' in his back hands. With his front hands Śiva caresses Mohinī's breasts. Mohinī holds Śiva's genitals in her hands. This panel justifies the concept that Hariharaputra was born in the hands of Mohinī. In another rare panel (No. 13) the same theme is portrayed. Mohinī stands to the left of Śiva, leaning slightly forward. The left leg is slightly retracted with the heel lifted while the fingers are touching the ground. She is endowed with alluring thighs recalling the description of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇam* wherein Mohinī's thighs are said to resemble the trunks of elephants (*supra*). Mohinī holds Śiva's genitals as though to receive something (fig. 5). Obviously Mohinī is having Śiva's semen deposited in her palms. Śiva is four handed and bears the *mṛga* and *ṭaṅka* in back hands. The front right hand is in *abhaya mudrā*. The front left hand is not visible. Both Śiva and Mohinī are wearing *skandhamālās*. Śiva is quite naked while Mohinī is in underclothes. A rare panel (No. 15) depicts both Śiva and Viṣṇu in the act of swinging a cradle (fig. 12). Viṣṇu stands holding the swing in his front hands while the back right hand bears the *cakra*. Śiva stands nearly. The baby, Hariharaputra, is perhaps inside cradle. In the present illustration instead of Mohinī, the original Viṣṇu himself is presented in a theme portraying the aftermath of the Mohinī-Śiva liaison.

Mohinī and Kaṅkālamūrti

In the panels depicting Kaṅkālamūrti ⁽¹⁹⁾ one (No. 19) or more (No. 18) ladies are present. The ladies are looking at Kaṅkālamūrti in admiration. They are wearing transparent garments. They hold a ladle in one of their hands. It is likely that they represent Mohinī since the *Śilpaśāstras* call them the better-half of Kaṅkālamūrti ⁽²⁰⁾ (fig. 6).

⁽¹⁸⁾ In the specimen plated (fig. 4A) Śiva is missing.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Kaṅkālamūrti is a standing *samabhaṅga* image with the right leg alone slightly raised in *kuñcita* attitude. He is four-handed. The back left hand holds a long *triśūla* placed on the shoulder. The front left hand holds a *kapāla* 'skull'. The front right hand holds a bunch of grass which an antelope is browsing. The back right hand holds a *kaṅkāla* 'small drum'. It is because of this he is called Kaṅkālamūrti. By his side stands a dwarf demon with a vessel on the head. For the iconographical details of Kaṅkālamūrti see *Sarasvatīyaci-trakarmaśāstra* (chap. 24), *Agastyasakalādhikāra* (chap. 13), and *Kāśyapaśilpaśāstra* (*Paṭalam* 75).

⁽²⁰⁾ The ladle carried by the ladies indicate that they may as well be *ṛṣipatnīs* who were supposed to feed the mendicant. The fact that more than one lady is present also supports this.



Fig. 3 - Churning the Ocean of Milk and Nilakaṇṭha, Saptarṣiśvara Temple, Svāmi Car, Lālgudi.



Fig. 4 - (A) Mohini, (B) Mohini and Śiva engaged in amorous play; Koṇḍālamman Temple Car, Pullambādi.

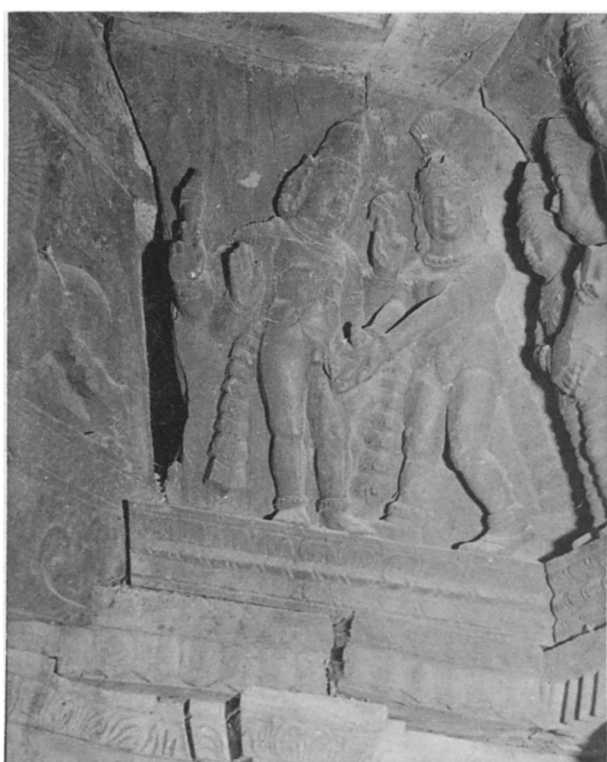


Fig. 5 - Mohini and Śiva during amorous play, Śikhāgiriśvara Temple, Amman Car, Kuḍumiyāmalai.



Fig. 6 - Kaṅkālamūrti and Mohini, Śikhāgiriśvara Temple, Amman Car, Kuḍumiyāmalai.

Mohinī with R̥sis

Mohinī making fun in the exultant company of r̥sis is a very popular theme in art (Nos. 20-44). In most of these panels Mohinī is presented as a gigantic figure surrounded by a host of pigmy r̥sis (fig. 7). In most specimens she is stark naked. In exceptional cases Mohinī appears partly nude but clearly exhibiting her genitals so as to attract the r̥sis. The r̥sis look at Mohinī with wonder as though they have met an unearthly beauty. They make all sorts of pretentious actions to win her favour. Some of them raise their hands above their heads with folded palms in *añjali bandha* to mean surrender. Some hold the feet of Mohinī and massage them so that Mohinī may cast her gracious looks on them. Some hold their genitals in their own hands, unable to dispel lustful sentiments and win over Mohinī by exhibiting their manliness. In a remarkable specimen (No. 38) Mohinī catches hold of the beard of a libidinous r̥si with one hand and knuckles him with the other hand while the sage who is supposed to have renounced mundane pleasures is seen to be holding his own genitals in one hand and a *danda* 'staff' ⁽²¹⁾ in another hand (fig. 8). In one (No. 43) Mohinī is dancing naked while the r̥sis are in an ecstatic mood playing musical instruments.

Mohinī with Bhasmāsura

The panels portraying Bhasmāsura and Mohinī present the demon as either wooing the nymph or as being caught by conflagration. Mohinī stands partly bedecked with transparent garments and some ornaments like anklets. She holds a lotus (No. 53) or a bunch of flowers (No. 51) in her left hand. She wears sandals and is in a gracious walking pose with her left leg firmly on the ground and her right leg in *kuñcita* attitude (No. 51). Her face is turned back non-chalantly but at the same time intentionally, to capture the attention of the demon. Bhasmāsura stands behind her in *tribhaṅga* ⁽²²⁾ or *atibhaṅga* attitude with the hands lifted above the head (fig. 9). In most of the specimens Bhasmāsura is placing his hands on his head. Fire consumes the demon from below (fig. 11). This indicates that the dance theme making the demon put his hands on his own head was more popular with sculptures than the other versions of the destruction of Bhasmāsura.

4. Sexological Background of Mohinī-Siva Liaison

Some comments upon the nature of the sexual relationship between Mohinī and Śiva state that it was 'incestuous' (Oppert 1972: 509). Man having sexual

⁽²¹⁾ It is a characteristic weapon of the anchorite.

⁽²²⁾ Dancing images are expected to be so (Acharya 1927: 446-47).



Fig. 7 - Mohinī with pigmy ṛṣi, Śrī Āṇḍāl Temple Car, Śrīvilliputtūr.



Fig. 8 - Mohinī knuckling ṛṣi, Subrahmanya Temple, Pāṅguni Car, Kuṇḍrakkuḍi.

intercourse with one of his own sex is contrary to the natural order, animal behaviour and social acceptance. In the Mohinī-Śiva myth, Kacciappa Śivāchārya raises the issue through Viṣṇu himself who asks Śiva, when the latter expressed his desire to unite with the former, 'whether it would be dignified for a man to have sexual intercourse with a man' ⁽²³⁾. Śiva replied to Viṣṇu that the latter was none but his own *śakti* ⁽²⁴⁾. Śiva justified his claim by pointing out instances when Viṣṇu admittedly served him as a *śakti*: (1) during the visit to Dāruka,

⁽²³⁾ *Kanda Purāṇam*, 2: 32: 34.

... āḍavar āḍavarōḍu cērn
Din̄ba meidi yirundaṇar illaiyāl
Muṇbu kēṭṭadu mandru mudalva nī
Vinbodeṇṇaip puṇarvadu māṭciyō.

⁽²⁴⁾ Literally energy, it stands for betterhalf.



Fig. 9 - Mohinī and Bhasmāsura, Soumya Nārāyaṇa Perumāl Temple Car, Tirukkōṣṭiyūr.



Fig. 10 - Homosexuality: Oral Congress, Subrahmanya Temple Car, Malaikkōyil (Coimbatore District).



Fig. 11 - Mohinī and Bhasmāsura, Sikhāgiriśvara Temple, Ammaṇ Car, Kuḍumiyāmalai.



Fig. 12 - Śiva-Viṣṇu swing Cradle, Mayūra-nātha Temple Car, Peddavanalūr (Rāmanāthapuram Dt.).

Viṣṇu (Mohinī) served as Śiva's (Bhikṣāṭana) better-half and (2) when Viṣṇu gave birth to Brahmā through the lotus emanating from his navel ⁽²⁵⁾, the father was none other but Śiva (*Kanda Purāṇam*, 2: 32: 35-36). Śivañānasvāmigaḷ makes Viṣṇu himself acknowledge his femininity (*Kāñchi Purāṇam*, *Mācāttanṇali Patalam*, v. 7). It is argued that Viṣṇu assumed the form of Mohinī to deceive the demons but the episode relating to the birth of Sāsta proves Śiva's manliness and Viṣṇu's femininity ⁽²⁶⁾. Viṣṇu is a male deity in the Hindu pantheon, like his counterpart, Śiva. The attempts to make him a female seem to have been made for the purpose of making him appear inferior to Śiva ⁽²⁷⁾. It is also probable that the myth-makers wanted to create a God Superior, i.e., Sāsta, which could only be accomplished by making the greatest gods like Śiva and Viṣṇu fuse their energies into one. Whatever the mythological justification behind the union of Śiva and Viṣṇu may be, it involves a sociological question relating to sexual intercourse between two male deities. So it will not be faulty to observe that the Mohinī-Śiva liaison is a clear case of homosexuality wherein a deliberate attempt to brand it heterosexuality has been made by projecting Viṣṇu as the Female Principle ⁽²⁸⁾.

In ancient India homosexuality was much abhorred in literature and art. The society did not encourage it. So historians feel that India which condemned such unhygienic methods of sexual intercourse was 'far healthier than most other ancient cultures' (Basham 1971: 173). The *Kāmasūtra* of Vātsyāyana writes about homosexual methods discouragingly and warns that men of reputation should not involve themselves in such affairs (Upadhyaya 1970: 132). The discourse on oral congress as found in the *Kāmasūtra* proves beyond doubt that homosexuality was not totally unknown to ancient India. The fact was that it was not encouraged. That was all. It seems to have gained a hold in the medieval period after the 11th century A.D. The Mohinī-Śiva liaison seems to be the first homosexual theme ever admitted in Purāṇic accounts. It is likely that it

⁽²⁵⁾ The iconographical presentation of the theme is called Śeṣaśāyī in which Viṣṇu reclines on the primeval serpent, Śeṣa, with a lotus issuing from his navel where Brahma is seated (Rao 1971: I, Pt. I, 91-96; Desai 1973: 24-30, figs. 21, 23, 25).

⁽²⁶⁾ The poet adds that Viṣṇu felt shy when Śiva approached him. Śiva held him tightly with all the aggressiveness of a man and embraced him. Viṣṇu like a frail person, meekly submitted. These sentiments, characteristic of the two sexes, are portrayed to assert the masculine and feminine roles taken by the partners engaged in sexual intercourse.

⁽²⁷⁾ Most of the Śaivite *Purāṇams* such as *Kanda Purāṇam* and *Kāñchi Purāṇam* exalt Śiva by denigrating Viṣṇu. This was mainly due to the sectarian rivalry exhibited by Śaivites and Vaiṣṇavites in the middle ages. These bickerings had their impact not only on mythological compositions but also on the development of iconography (Kalidos 1980: 213, 216).

⁽²⁸⁾ In fact it is a case of 'transexuality'. Presenting Viṣṇu as Mohinī in female attire is an attempt at 'transvestitism'.



Fig. 13 - Homosexuality: fellatio, *Kalyāṇamaṇḍapam*, Subrahmanya Temple, Tirupparankunram.

took place only after the 11th century A.D. as the ethical aspects pertaining to it are briefly discussed in the *Kanda Purāṇam* ⁽²⁹⁾.

By associating the great gods of the Hindu pantheon, such as Śiva and Viṣṇu,

⁽²⁹⁾ It could have been an impact of Muhammadan culture. Homosexuality was quite a familiar affair with them. Some of the Muhammadan rulers of Delhi even maintained a serraglio consisting of males or eunuchs. Even now in the Arab countries the trade in male flesh is very common.

a kind of religious sanction was given to sexual practices hitherto considered as immoral and unsocial ⁽³⁰⁾. In his attempt to vindicate the sexual behaviour of Śiva, Kacciyappa Śivāchārya has made an attempt to justify homosexuality itself ⁽³¹⁾. Having obtained the literary sanction which was necessary to canvass public opinion, the homosexual theme made its first entry in art forms during the later Vijayanagar period after the 16th century A.D. ⁽³²⁾. In this sociological process the Mohinī-Śiva liaison played a substantial role.

The basic necessity involved in sexual intercourse is procreation. In nature itself provision is made for it. Animals mate as a response to a biological urge which results in the propagation of the species. But in the case of human beings sex is viewed not merely as a biological urge but also with some religious tinge and ethical values. Therefore sex is either elevated to sublimity or debased to bestiality. When sex is aimed at the proliferation of the human race, it is viewed as a noble act. When it is meant for quenching the lower appetite, it is viewed with disfavour. Perversion of sex or aberration is also to be measured within a context free from value-judgments. Relative terms such as good and bad, noble

⁽³⁰⁾ There are other evidences to prove the existence of homosexuality in the medieval period. *Siddhas*, a class of Tamil sages and demi-gods in *Purāṇams*, considered that by swallowing semen one could rejuvenate himself and attain immortality (Zvelebil 1973: 79, 140-41). Tirumūlar, a Tamil *siddha* (11th century A.D.?), calls it *amuri* or *śivanir* 'Śiva's water' (*Tirumandiram*, v. 826). This indicates that a kind of therapy involving homosexuality was known to the *Siddhas*. A number of panels depicting sages, possibly *Siddhas*, with their phalluses directed towards their own mouths, or one sucking his own phallus or one holding another man's phallus are found in the temple cars (figs. 10, 14). These also confirm the prevalence of homosexual practices under the pretext of therapy or cult orgy.

⁽³¹⁾ Perhaps he was inspired by the esoteric practices of the *Siddhas* and was himself one among them, though no attempt has so far been made to identify him as a *siddha*.

⁽³²⁾ The *kalyāṇamandapam* 'marriage pavilion' of the Subrahmaṇya Temple at Tirupparaṅkunram (Madurai District) houses some sculptures on homosexual themes in its pillars in the front line. Men like acrobats are found standing one above the other. The phallus of the man standing below ascends high in *ūrdhva* 'erect perpendicularly' pose and reaches the mouth of the other man standing on the former's shoulder (fig. 13A). In the *mukhamandapam* 'front pavilion' of the same temple similar motifs are found. In one homosexuality and heterosexuality are mingled. A man standing below holds his phallus in *ūrdhva* pose which a man in inverted posture has drawn into his mouth. His phallus in turn stands erect which a woman standing above all has inserted into her vagina (fig. 13B). In another motif a man stands below in *ālīḍhāsana*, holding his *ūrdhvaliṅga* in hands. A woman standing on his shoulder has it drawn into her *āvaḍai*. Another man stands upon her whose *ūrdhvaliṅga* is inserted into the *āvaḍai* of the woman standing upon his shoulder in turn. In this case the *liṅga* peeps through the mouth of the woman standing at the top and ascends high in *ūrdhva* posture. Above all is depicted a temple in which the bachelor god, Gaṇapati, is enshrined. In this panel the *ūrdhvaliṅga* seems to point out the quintessence of Tantric philosophy that *bhoga*, heterosexual (or also homosexual?), leads to the Ultimate Reality.

and ignoble or moral and immoral do not have any uniform universal application. What is deemed unsocial and abhorrent in one society may not be in another society. In the lower animals procreation dominates more in sexual behaviour than pleasure. So aberrative practices like homosexuality are unpopular with them. But man in his curiosity had not only sophisticated sex by inventing various poses of intercourse ⁽³³⁾ but also went beyond the natural order and made it possible even for two positives or two negatives to meet. Here the motive was pleasure and not procreation. Dominated by the quest for pleasure, man was more particular about pleasure than the sex of the partners engaged in the act. So aberrative practices like homosexuality and bestiality became more



Fig. 14 - Man sucking his own phallus, Chintāmaṇināthar Temple Car, Vāsudēvanallūr (Tirunelvēli Dt.).

⁽³³⁾ Such as the sixty four techniques of sexual union described by the Hindus.

popular with *Homo sapiens*. But these practices could not be practised openly by the social animals due to religious and ethical notions or legal complications.

From the above study what the author wants to conclude (from his own impression of the subject in its various representations in mythology, art and social values) is that the Hindus, especially the sages and seers at a higher plane in the social cadre, had viewed sexual union as a symbolic merger of the souls, metaphorically signifying the merger of *jīvātmas* with *paramātma* at the time of *pralaya* 'final deluge'. In this attempt they had no restraint in viewing human beings of either sex and animals as feathers of the same plumage. All are souls and it is the union of souls that matters in ritual and cult orgy. So heterosexuality, homosexuality and bestiality are all the different denominators of united souls that the civilized society has chosen to demarcate but for the *sādhus* all the denominators are one and the same in as far as they stand for the union of souls.

The historian can thus not pass any judgment regarding the vindication of homosexuality as a sin or blessing since it all depends upon the social concepts of a people living in a particular place at a particular time. He cannot say what is right or wrong for mankind as a whole. Viewed in this perspective, homosexuality was practised in ancient India with some inhibitions which were due to the fear of social denunciation while attempts to eradicate the inhibitions were made in the medieval period through literary accounts, *Purāṇas* and *Silpaśāstras*, and their application in art forms. The Mohini 'Viṣṇu' and Śiva liaison served as the best example in this respect. In this process of socio-morphosis the tantric cults such as those of the school of *Siddhas* played their part, coming forward to approve homosexuality on the grounds of therapy by highlighting ambitious goals such as immortality.

APPENDIX

LOCATION OF IMAGES CITED IN THE TEXT

specimen number	name of car (*)	location of images (**)		Name of the Temple	Place	District
		side	tier			
AMRTAMANTHANAM						
1	Ammaṇ	Back	III	Māriammaṇ	Thānippāḍi	Chengalpattu
2	Svāmi	Right	III	Gaṅgādīśvara	Chinna Salem	North Arcot
3	Viṣṇu	— do —	II	Varadarāja	Panruṭṭi	— do —
4	Svāmi	Back	II	Sevantiśvara	Sirāppalli	Salem
5	Ammaṇ	— do —	III	Māriammaṇ	Nāmagiripēṭṭai	— do —
6	— do —	Front	II	— do —	Uḍumalaipēṭṭai	Coimbatore
7	— do —	Right	II	Kumbheśvara	Kumbhakōṇam	Thaṇjāvūr
8	Svāmi	— do —	I	Saptaṛṣiśvara	Lālguḍi	Tiruchirāppalli
9	Cittirai	— do —	III	Śrī Raṅganātha	Śrīraṅgam	— do —
10	Viṣṇu	— do —	II	Śrī Āṇḍāl	Śrīvilliputtūr	Rāmanāthapuram
11	Gaṇapati	Left	III	Tirukkāmeśvara	Villiyānūr	Pondicherry
MOHINĪ WITH ŚIVA						
12	Ammaṇ	Right	II	Koḷundāmmaṇ	Puḷḷambāḍi	Tiruchirāppalli
13	— do —	— do —	II	Śikhāgiriśvara	Kuḍumiyāmalai	Pudukkōṭṭai
14	Ammaṇ	Right	II	— do —	— do —	— do —
15	Svāmi	— do —	II	Mayūranātha	Peddavanallūr	Rāmanāthapuram
16	— do —	Front	II	Kāśi Viśvanātha	Ambāsamudram	Tirunelvēli
17	— do —	— do —	II	Tirumūlanātha	— do —	— do —

(*) Some of the Śiva, Ammaṇ, Viṣṇu and Muruga temples possess more than one car. The additional cars are distinguished either by the names of the deities to whom the cars are dedicated or the months in which the cars are used. Svāmi 'Śiva', Ammaṇ, Viṣṇu, Muruga, Caṇḍeśa, Gaṇapati and Aiyāṇār denote deities. *Cittirai*, *Māci* and *Paṅguṇi* denote the Tamil months. The present annexure is from Kalidos (1981: 397-98).

(**) The side to which ropes are attached to pull the car is the Front side. The rear side of the cars is denoted as Back. Right and Left are the sides which lie to the left and right of a man if he stands facing the front side of the car. All the four sides have three tiers of sculptures, arranged in horizontal rows. That which lies immediately above the axle is tier I. The one resting on tier I is tier II, which is usually tapered. Tier III rests on tier II and culminates in the pedestal of the car (Kalidos 1984: fig. 1).

specimen number	name of car	location of images		Name of the Temple	Place	District
		side	tier			

MOHINI WITH KANKĀLAMŪRTI

18	Ammaṇ	Left	I	Nandikeśvara	Turaiyūr	Tiruchirāppalli
19	— do —	Back	II	Śikhāgiriśvara	Kuḍumiyāmalai	Pudukkōṭṭai

MOHINI WITH ṚṢIS

20	Viṣṇu	Left	I	Pārthasārathi	Tiruvallikkēṇi	Madras
21	— do —	Back	I	Ādi Keśava	Śrīperumpudūr	Cheṅgalpaṭṭu
22	— do —	Right	I	Lakṣmī Nṛsimha	Siṅgaperumāḷkōyil	— do —
23	— do —	Left	I	Ardhanārīśvara	Tiruchcheṅgōḍu	Salem
24	— do —	— do —	I	Lakṣmī Nṛsimha	Sēdamaṅgalam	— do —
25	Muruga	— do —	I	Subrahmaṇya	Aḷagumalai	Coimbatore
26	Ammaṇ	Right	I	Paccaināyakiammaṇ	Kolappalūr	Periyār
27	Viṣṇu	Left	I	Cakrapāṇi	Kumbhakōṇam	Thaṅjāvūr
28	Svāmi	Right	II	Abhimukheśvara	— do —	— do —
29	Muruga	— do —	I	Subrahmaṇya	Eṇkaṇ	— do —
30	Svāmi	— do —	I	Bhāskareśvara	Parudiyapparkōyil	— do —
31	Viṣṇu	— do —	I	Santāna Rāma	Niḍamaṅgalam	— do —
32	Svāmi	— do —	I	Navanīteśvara	Sikkal	— do —
33	Svāmi	Right	I	Tyāgarāja	Tiruvārūr	Thaṅjāvūr
34	Caṇḍeśa	— do —	II	— do —	— do —	— do —
35	Muruga	Front	II	Bālasubrahmaṇya	Puṇjai Puhālūr	Tiruchirāppalli
36	Svāmi	Right	I	Simhapurīśvara	Karuppattūr	— do —
37	Gaṇapati	— do —	II	Bṛhadāmbāḷ	Tirugokarṇam	Pudukkōṭṭai
38	Paṅguṇi	— do —	III	Subrahmaṇya	Kunḍrakkuḍi	Rāmanāthapuram
39	Svāmi	— do —	II	Somanātha	Māṇāmadurai	— do —
40	Viṣṇu	Right	II	Śrī Āṇḍāḷ	Śrīvilliputtūr	— do —
41	Svāmi	Back	I	Tirumūlanātha	Ambāsamudram	Tirunelvēli
42	— do —	Right	I	Vilvavaṇanātha	Kaḍayam	— do —
43	Māci	Left	I	Ādinātha	Ālvārtirunagari	— do —
44	Ammaṇ	Right	I	Kumariammaṇ	Kanyākumari	Kanyākumari

MOHINI WITH BHASMĀSURA

45	Muruga	Left	I	Tirumuruganātha	Tirumurugaṇpūṇḍi	Coimbatore
46	— do —	— do —	II	Daṇḍāyudhapāṇi	Siravaṇapuram	— do —
47	Svāmi	Back	I	Amṛtaghaṭeśvara	Tirukkaḍaiyūr	Thaṅjāvūr

specimen number	name of car	location of images		Name of the Temple	Place	District
		side	tier			
48	— do —	Front	I	Kāmpahareśvara	Tirubhuvāṇam	— do —
49	Muruga	Right	I	Tyāgarāja	Tiruvārūr	— do —
50	Ammaṇ	Left	II	Saptaṛṣīśvara	Lālgudi	Tiruchirāppalli
51	Gaṇapati	— do —	II	— do —	— do —	— do —
52	Aiyaṇār	Right	II	Aiyaṇār	Pūvālūr	— do —
53	Ammaṇ	Right	II	Śikhāgiriśvara	Kuḍumiyāmalai	Pudukkōṭṭai

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